

(re)(dis)oriented: Queerness and Electronic Literature (2019)

If we consider the rules and expectations of normativity as being authored by hegemonic forces, it follows that the defiance of authorship is a defiance of normativity: queerness. As technology evolves the ways in which texts are created and read, a new relationship between writer and reader is revealed. By making possible active participation on the part of the reader through interaction and post-production, electronic literature has moved us beyond the passive reading of a printed page. This disruption to our common notion of authorship exposes opportunities to challenge the normative narrative and guides us toward a new found empowerment: our ability to challenge the dictatorial preciousness and pervasiveness of authorship. Technology has always had the power to position us within and around the dominant discourse. However, in the case of electronic literature we not only have the potential to recognize the ways in which we are constrained by authority and authorship but also the ways in which we can extract from, intervene in, piece together, and write our own narratives. This collision of technology and human shows us that we can liberate ourselves and our stories from the dominant culture. Is queerness embedded in the technology of electronic literature? Does electronic literature - like queerness - show us that inscribed, intended, or normative meanings are not fixed? In this essay I will examine the dissolution of authority and authorship in electronic literature as a reflection and manifestation of queerness.

Our engagement with text has the ability to position or orient our bodies and behaviors. If in fact technology's intervention in how texts are made and consumed disrupts traditional assumptions of authorship then, through these disruptions, we are likely to find ourselves reoriented or disoriented. This act of (re)(dis)orientation points us toward alternative ways of being in, interacting with, and understanding ourselves in the world. Thus, the connection between

queerness and electronic literature is not so much that the technology is a prosthesis or an appendage of the queer body. It is not that electronic literature is simply a tool or a mechanism with which queerness is further enabled. Rather, electronic literature and queerness illustrate, inform, and empower each other. This combined force has the capacity to manifest itself as real action enabling us to dismantle the preciousness of authorship, map strategies to disrupt the hegemony, and be empowered - individually and collectively - to re-envision ourselves. Thus, queerness as seen in and performed by electronic literature is a form of knowledge, capable of evolving what it means to be a human, how humanness is constructed, and how human bodies are defined in the world.

Firstly, I would like to clarify some of the established queer theory that informs my position. In the early days of queer theory, David M. Halperin, who has worked for many years in the fields of gender studies, queer theory, critical theory, material culture and visual culture wrote:

‘Queer’...does not designate a class of already objectified pathologies or perversions; rather, it describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance. It is from the eccentric positionality occupied by the queer subject that it may become possible to envision a variety of possibilities for reordering the relations among sexual behaviours, erotic identities, constructions of gender, forms of knowledge, regimes of enunciation, logics of representation, modes of self-construction, and practices of community – for restructuring the relations among power, truth, and desire.¹

Even as queer theory was beginning to take shape, many people understood that the reclamation of *queer* as a term of empowerment was not merely meant to be uplifting for sexual and gender

¹ Halperin, David M. *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. Oxford University Press. New York, NY. 1995. Page 62.

others nor as validation of a particular lifestyle. Queer is political, epistemological, phenomenological, social, aesthetic, and textual. It is a position from which we are able to restructure the many ways in which bodies desire, move, read, speak, learn, and perceive. This broad understanding of queer allows us to look for and find queerness in images and objects, spaces and technologies, actions and deeds, ideas and texts.

When our perspective, behavior, and desires are dictated by our unique circumstances, rather than over-arching hegemonic forces, we are freed by our particular orientation from societal constraints. Our location, literally and symbolically, determines our point of view and our paths of action. Cultural theorist Sara Ahmed writes in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, “Orientations are about how we begin; how we proceed from ‘here,’ which affects how what is ‘there’ appears, how it presents itself.”² Ahmed’s point of view is phenomenological. She is interested in how the objects, images, and texts that we encounter draw us onto or turn us away from a path. And, in turn, how those paths define us. Queerness and electronic literature inhabit a position outside of normativity. It is a position from which we are able to consider alternative ways for bodies and texts to be. Bodies and texts directly affect one another: guiding, disrupting, informing, questioning, and locating. The paths we follow in the space of the corporeal world are deeply affected by our activity in the spaces of texts and technology.

Another valuable insight is found in the work of queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz who considered queerness to be a futurity, always drawing us forward: “Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”³ Queerness is not something that is necessarily achieved but, rather, a sign or guide post

² Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke University Press. Durham NC. 2006. Page 8.

³ Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York University Press, New York NY. 2009. Page 1.

poised on the horizon, with a gravitational pull towards a different sort of world-making. The utopia to which Muñoz refers is not that of science fiction novels, it is a refusal to accept the disadvantageous moment and a vigilant desire to manifest more promising realities. Muñoz is less interested in our mastery of things and far more interested in process and becoming. The idiosyncrasy of interaction and post-production encountered in electronic literature is indicative of process and becoming. Likewise, as seen in electronic literature, technology continually presents new opportunities to imagine and experience the world. And, the fast-paced development of what technology is able to do seems always to be eclipsed by what technology will make possible.

Working from these theoretical models I will show an empowered relationship between technology, text, and queerness in support of queer looking, queer reading, and queer action. Whereas much of the ideology expressed in mass media is contrived to direct people onto an established normative path, technology can intervene as a potent provocateur: new paths may be constructed, new relationships established, and alternative criticalities articulated. Furthermore, the ways in which these actions operate are decidedly queer in their ability to reshape signs, signification, and communication; queer in that they construct quasi-identities and irreconcilable discrepancies; queer in their defiance of authorship. In their seminal book on multimodality Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes write, “The unfolding history of media technologies challenges us to reconceive, again and again, how we communicate with and through media, how media interact with one another, and how we reflexively understand ourselves, individually and collectively, in our interactions across different media platforms.”⁴ The synergy of technology, writing, and reading comprises an evolving techno-aesthetic-queerness. It offers up a lens of criticality and reveals the mutability of both language and bodies.

⁴ Alexander, Jonathan. Rhodes, Jacqueline. *On Multimodality: New Media in Composition Studies*. National Council of Teachers of English. 2014. Page 60.

Historically, many literary movements have explored alternative types of texts. The works of Apollinaire, the Dadaists, Concrete poetry, Oulipo, and Fluxus all investigated new forms of writing and, thus, new forms of reading. While redefining the role of the reader these movements pointed us toward new ways in which to conceive of, present, and experience the world. Scholar, writer, and lecturer Ruth Blacksell, who has done extensive research on typography and text writes, “The shift from object to idea is connected to the emergence of a new art-critical position, which moved away from the idea of the passive spectator *looking* at a pre-existing artwork toward the idea of an active spectator engaged somehow in the physical and/or conceptual creation of the work.”⁵ Similarly, the very nature of texts in the digital realm creates an active dynamic relationship between writer and reader. Interactivity, appropriation, manipulation, readability, kinetic movement, and visual form combine in a way that redefines what texts are and how they operate. The fixity and boundaries, characteristic of the traditional printed book, are broken down as the role of author becomes intertwined with that of reader. Elaborating on the ways in which electronic literature establishes a different kind of writer/reader relationship, literary critic Katherine Hayles says:

With texts that allow some degree of interactivity, reading also becomes a performance in a more kinesthetically complex and vivid sense than is the case with reading print texts. The machine produces the text as an event; the reader interacts with that event in ways that significantly modify and even determine its progress; these readerly interventions feed back into the machine to change its behavior, which further inflects the course of the performance. Less an object than an event, the digital text emerges as a

⁵ Blacksell, Ruth. *From Looking to Reading: Text-Based Conceptual Art and Typographic Discourse*. *Design Issues*: Volume 29, Number 2. The MIT Press, Cambridge MA. Spring 2013. Web.

dance between artificial and human intelligences, machine and natural language, as these evolve together through time.⁶

What Hayles is describing is a sort of feedback loop, a network that exists between the analog and digital worlds. Whether the emergent text is performed by code, reader interaction, or a combination of thereof, there is a phenomenological experience specific to digital texts that is simply not possible with printed text. As digital texts have been freed from the delimited surface of the printed page, so is queerness freed from the delimited boundaries of normativity. Both instances of liberation are opportunities to become (re)(dis)oriented. Both are disruptive alternatives to normativity. Sara Ahmed's ideas cogently link Hayles and Blacksell's ideas to queerness: "This is how phenomenology offers a queer angle: by bringing objects to life in their loss of place, in the failure of gathering to keep things in their place."⁷ Lacking a determined location, generating difference, and open to multiple readings, digital texts and queerness agitate our apprehension of a dominant discourse.

The evolution of literature is a long and rich continuum of cultural production and electronic literature both borrows from the traditions and evolves the lineage. Ultimately, however, regarding its cultural impact electronic literature establishes an entirely new literary form: new roles are actualized, new understandings to time and space are negotiated, new knowledges and skills are mastered, different behaviors and actions are affirmed. Again I turn to Katherine Hayles:

Because electronic literature is normally created and performed within a context of networked and programmable media, it is also informed by the powerhouses of contemporary culture, particularly computer games, films, animations, digital arts,

⁶ Hayles, N. Katherine. *The Time of Digital Poetry: From Object to Event. New Media Poetics*. Eds. Morris, Adalaide & Swiss, Thomas. The MIT Press, Cambridge MA. 2009. Pages 186-7.

⁷ Ahmed. Page 165.

graphic design, and electronic visual culture. In this sense electronic literature is a 'hopeful monster' composed of parts taken from diverse traditions that may not always fit neatly together. Hybrid by nature, it comprises a trading zone in which different vocabularies, expertises and expectations come together. Electronic literature tests the boundaries of the literary and challenges us to re-think our assumptions of what literature can do and be.⁸

Many of the unique traits of the medium as described by Hayles can, almost word for word, be applied to queerness: hybrid, unresolved, dislocated, rearranged, and redefined. The lack of site specificity and fixity in texts experienced through technology renders texts transitory and multiple. Parts are (re)assembled, (re)constructed, (re)arranged, and (re)read. They are also encoded, processed, uploaded, retrieved, rewritten, saved, and deleted. Unlike printed texts, electronic literature incorporates kinetic and performative aspects that evolve from and subsequently disrupt well-established literary norms. Electronic literature maps out ways in which humans may perform or reject societal norms. In a like fashion, queerness lays bare norms and with a pioneering force composes alternative bodies, alliances, and pathways.

Of course, the role technology plays in the reception and meaningfulness of electronic literature is key. For example, it is not merely our ability to read texts on a computer monitor or a device, even though this marks an undeniable shift in the materiality of "books." Discrete opportunities for both innovation and interaction are vital to new forms of writing and reading – and, I would add, queerness. Poet and Professor of Media Studies Loss Pequeño Glazier offers thoughtful insight into these issues: "Digital poetics are not print poetry merely repositioned in the new medium. Instead, e-poetics extend the investigation of innovative practice as it occurred

⁸ Hayles, Katherine. *Electronic Literature: What Is It?* The Electronic Literature Organization. Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (MITH) at the University of Maryland, College Park. 2007. Web.

in print media, making possible the continuation of lines of inquiry that could not be fulfilled in that medium.”⁹ Thinking of Muñoz’s concept of queerness as futurity, I find a correlation to Glazier’s proposal. Textual and cultural shifts in the presentation and reception of otherness are innovations that can establish radically new mediums of identity. Not only are our understandings of queer/text evolved, but also culture is evolved. Glazier goes on to say, “The public life of poetics has, perhaps, been nowhere more visible, with its incessant transmission, than in the electronic poetics. An electronic poetry is a public word, projected across a public world, across systems, itself a system.”¹⁰ The expansiveness of this public life is mirrored in the way queer ideas, actions, and bodies become more visible in and through technology. As a broadly defined and empowered identity, queerness moves further out of the private realm and into the public; queerness expands beyond a specificity of personal or sexual desire to a path of world-making. Thus, queerness and electronic literature extend interpretation and disrupt normativity to the point where the effects of this disruption can be profoundly impactful: personally, politically, socially, spatially, and psychologically.

A different point of view, also reflective of Muñoz’s vision of a utopian futurity, is found in the analysis of Poet and Media Theorist Tom O’Connor. O’Connor’s stance examines the capacity of digital poetry, and all forms of electronic literature, to challenge the structures of normativity and reveal what is possible: “Poetic perceptions that generate alternatives for personal and cultural significations are vital tools for halting the homogenization, sterility and inertia that often plague many cultural constructions.”¹¹ In the way that digital poetry can offer alternate significations, so can queerness: showing the culture what is possible outside of the hegemony.

⁹ Pequeño Glazier, Loss. *Digital Poetics: Hypertext, Visual-Kinetic Text and Writing in Programmable Media (Modern & Contemporary Poetics)*. University Alabama Press; 1st Edition. 2008. Print. Page 26.

¹⁰ Ibid. Page 37.

¹¹ O’Connor, Tom. *Poetic Acts & New Media*. University Press of America, New York NY. 2007. Print. Page xviii.

Digital poetry affords us new ways of reading texts while queerness affords us new ways of reading bodies and behaviors. Doing so makes possible alternative perceptions and connections. O'Connor adds, "Media poetry specifically highlights and exploits the capacity of new multimedia to exponentially enhance *the possible*."¹² Not only as some fantasy utopian future but also as an attainable future on the foreseeable horizon.

Another interplay between electronic literature and queerness comes in the form of innovation. It is a shared quality of malleability, unreadability, and fluidity. Through newly constructed relationships, identities, and perceptions we evolve our understanding of self, other, and place. We can subvert and, at times, repudiate the norms once thought to be stable and determined. Author, media theorist, and Professor C. T. Funkhauser notes, "Just as digital poetry has become more dynamic, and in certain senses has made poetry more contemporary and dynamic by moving away from a fixed state, ways in which works can be theoretically and aesthetically built and categorized are multiple and fluid. As readers of [electronic literature], we must ourselves become mouldable, capable of reshaping ourselves and our expectations."¹³ Queers are, often out of necessity, adept at playing a multiplicity of roles: family persona, work persona, school persona, community persona, private persona. Whereas clarity of one's beliefs, gender, political affiliations, desires, etc. is demanded by the normative narrative, malleability has been a necessary factor in the lives of queers for both navigating and challenging normative rules and expectations. As electronic literature and queerness de-compose clarity they disrupt our common notions and re-formation becomes key.

¹² Ibid. Page 4. (Italics in original text).

¹³ Funkhauser, C. T. *New Directions in Digital Poetry*. The Continuum International Publishing Group. New York NY. 2012. Page 6, 14.

Electronic literature and queerness exemplify a tension between what we see and what we are actually being shown. Both are less about what we see and more how we see: physically and culturally. Readability is abandoned or at the very least rendered inconsequential in favor of the enigmatic. Doing so makes space for us to reconsider our assumptions and travel new paths of perception. José Esteban Muñoz viewed queerness as, “illegible and therefore lost in relation to the straight mind’s mapping of space. Queerness is lost in space or lost in relation to the space of heteronormativity.”¹⁴ *Lost* as in unclear, unreadable. Correspondingly, C. T. Funkhauser says of electronic literature, “Even the most heavily disjointed works provide ways for readers to make stimulating connections. If a work’s contents are not and cannot be fixed, we can, even if momentarily, fix or build potentially profound understandings; patient, observant perusals offer rewards.”¹⁵ The ways humans interact and the repercussions of those interactions are played out over and over in endless pages of literature throughout the ages. And, when these narratives reflect hegemonic values it is from these narratives that we are constrained and measured. The result of unreadability is a disassembling of the production and dissemination of normative expectations. Moreover, as electronic literature performs queerness it not only guides us but also empowers us to interrogate authorship. In instances where readers play a part in the direction and outcome of a story the aura of authorship is unequivocally rejected and a more fluid relationship between author and reader implemented. A single text is essentially rewritten, comprised of a multitude of variations, each variation as valid as the other. Marjorie Perloff, Professor, Scholar and Critic, writes: “The revolution that occurred was not in writing for the computer screen but writing in an environment of hyperinformation, an environment where we are all authors.”¹⁶ Similarly, the

¹⁴ Muñoz. Page 73.

¹⁵ Funkhouser, C. T. Page 5.

¹⁶ Perloff, Marjorie. *Unoriginal Genius*. The University of Chicago Press. Chicago IL. 2010. Print. Page xi.

fluidity of queerness constructs alternatives outside of an authored hegemonic standard: bodies no longer fit into a binary paradigm, conventional notions are suddenly rendered unstable, the appearance of things shifts and opens to a multiplicity of meanings. David Halpern writes: “Queer theory has effectively re-opened the question of the relations between sexuality and gender, both as analytic categories and as lived experiences; it has pursued the task of detaching the critique of gender and sexuality from narrowly conceived notions of lesbian and gay identity; it has supported non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality, encouraging both theoretical and political resistance to normalization.”¹⁷ Neither our texts nor our bodies need be subjected to the authorship of a hierarchical ruling structure. Technology can support and guide us, through our experience of new kinds of texts, towards alternative ways of reading and, more importantly, being. It is possible now to author ourselves, to write alternative narratives, to read and be read in new ways: to be queer.

In rethinking authorship, whether that of texts or that of bodies, behaviors, and spaces we have the potential to make new meaning. American Poet, Editor, and Educator Barrett Watten explains, “The expanded field of poetics leads to the making of art in new genres, as a self-reflexive moment within a practice that creates grounds for new meaning.”¹⁸ This meaning can show us how we are referenced in the things that surround us. It may explain why we are drawn to this and rebuked by that. When encountering texts and bodies, what we are drawn to or what we recoil from not only reveals our position but also positions us. Sara Ahmed’s concept of queer orientation is pivotal to this idea:

¹⁷ Halperin, David M. *The Normalization of Queer Theory*. *Journal of Homosexuality* (Harrington Park Press, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc.) Vol. 45, No. 2/3/4, 2003. Web. 8 November 2016. Page 341.

¹⁸ Watten, Barrett. *Poetics in the Expanded Field: Textual, Visual, digital... New media Poetics*. Morris, Adalaide & Swiss, Thomas, eds. The MIT Press. Cambridge MA. 2009. Print. Page 335.

Queer orientations are those that don't line up, which by seeing the world slantwise allow other objects to come into view. A queer orientation might be one that does not overcome what is off line, and hence acts out of line with others. Inhabiting the queer slant may be a matter of everyday negotiation. This is not about the romance of being off line or the joy of radical politics (though it can be), but rather the everyday work of dealing with the perceptions of others, with the straightening devices and violence that might follow when such perceptions congeal into social forms.¹⁹

For me, both queerness and electronic literature are profoundly impactful in the ways in which they reposition texts and bodies. If it is possible to recognize our physical and cultural position in our encounters with technology and literature, not only is a space for self-awareness opened but also an opportunity for larger cultural critical assessment is made possible. It is revealed how complexity, ambiguity, or disruption evolves us: individually and collectively. When challenged, our assumptions can begin to break down exposing alternative ways to see, read, make, and act. This can shift our orientation, sensitize our bodies, and interrogate authority.

What I describe here is, for me, the foundation and meaning of queer: the ability to orient, reorient, and disorient us, the potential to empower and transform us, the criticality to question and subvert dominant networks. "Electronic technology offers unprecedented opportunities for the production, archiving, distribution, and promotion of texts," writes Loss Pequeño Glazier, "but the most important aspect of electronic space is that it is a space of poiesis."²⁰ Queerness also is a space of poiesis. Malleability, mutability, interactivity, hybridity, and ambiguity are powerful modes of creation. When queerness and technology come together to challenge, confound, or disrupt hegemonic rules and expectations they leverage the dexterity of our interpretation, transforming

¹⁹ Ahmed. Page 107.

²⁰ Pequeño Glazier, Loss. Page 3.

and evolving ourselves and perhaps even humanity. Queerness and electronic literature are inherently political, epistemological, phenomenological, social, aesthetic, and textual. They unveil multiple paths, peripheries, and gravitational pulls. They mobilize our bodies and minds to question authority and normativity. Queerness and electronic literature strip texts and bodies of their specificity and, in doing so, they expose how signification, identity, and authorship are multiple, personal, and malleable. Our power as queer subjects, queer makers, and queer readers is made evident in how we process information: how we access it, re-contextualize it, re-propose it, re-imagine it, re-format it. Queerness and electronic literature draw us down a path of empowerment by rendering us (re)(dis)oriented.

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